# Santa Clara County Historical New Almaden Quicksilver Town by Albert Johansson

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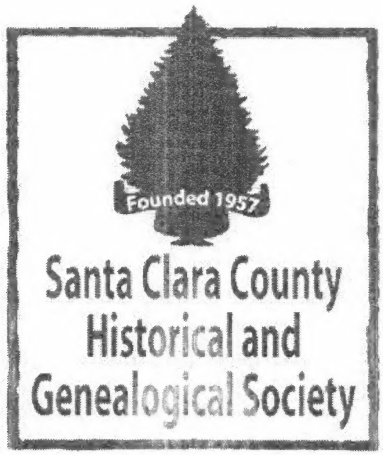
Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



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(CLASS II * HISTORICAL)

NEW ALMADEN QUICKSILVER TOWN

Santa Clara county has an old town that was built on quicksilver. It is New Almaden, 13 miles from San Jose, along Almaden road, which branches off U. S. 101 just south of the city.

In its heyday New Almaden mines produced more wealth than many of the biggest "mother lodes" of the gold country. Its product was indispensable to the gold mining industry in the early days when mercury was used to recover gold.

There was never any "quicksilver rush" to New Almaden but the property was the battlefield for the biggest law case of the time in California. Production of quicksilver here had repercussions all over the world, involving such interests as the Rothschild banking houses, Chinese industry, the cotton crop of India and the level of the pound sterling.

New Almaden is the most interesting village in Santa Clara Valley from the historic~~al~~ and picturesque point of view. It stands today almost as it used to be in the boom times of the quicksilver industry, except that most of the old timers have gone away. Their little adobe houses are now used as week-end and vacation cottages.

Hein street is lined with little adobe and frame cottages left from the old mining days when the smelters of the mine occupied them. As you enter the village the Casa Grande, or Big House, is on the left (now a resort), the former home of the mine superintendent. At the other end of the street stands one of the oldest adobe stores and saloons in California, a spot where the miners bought their supplies and whiskey. A little farther along is an old postoffice where a collection of articles from the mines is on view.

Above the city loom the reddish hills that are honeycombed with more than 100 miles of tunnels. On one of these hills the Mexican miners

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had their village which was called Spanish Town. The other workers were mostly Cornish hard rock miners brought over from the mines of Cornwall.

New Almaden was named after the ancient Almaden mine in Spain. The word "Almaden" is from the Arabic, "al", the and "maden", mine. The ancient Almaden mine in Spain has been worked for over 2000 years. Pliny remarked that this mine gave vermilion to the Greeks many years before Christ and later on was worked by the Romans for mercury.

The New Almaden ore deposits (cinnebar) were known to the Indians before the Spanish came to California. They used to rub the red ore, which they called "moketka", on their bodies for the glistening vermilion hue it gave them. The action of the mercury on their systems often caused salivation, making their teeth grow loose in their jaws.

In 1824 an old Indian told the Robles family and Luis Chabolla about the ore. Robles told Don Antonio Suñol. These men went to inspect the deposits, looking for silver and gold. They did not know what mercury ore was like, ~~and~~ so when they found no gold or silver they left the ore untouched. In 1825-6 the ore was used in painting the Mission Santa Clara.

A shrewd engineer, Andres Castillero, came to California from Mexico in 1845. While visiting at the Mission Santa Clara the fathers showed him some of the ore, which he immediately recognized as cinnabar. He knew that the Mexican government had offered a prize of $100,000 for the discovery of a rich mercury deposit so that they would not have to be dependent on the mother country (Spain) for this element.

Castillero immediately laid claim to the ore deposits which were on the rancho of Jose Reyes Berryessa. He got title from the alcalde, or justice, Antonio Maria Pico, on December 30, 1845.

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Forming a partnership with the Mission Santa Clara, Castillero hired William G. Chard, from New York, to start work on the ore. Chard made makeshift retorts out of gun barrels, condensing the vapor given off in water. In this way he got enough mercury to show that exploitation was commercially worthwhile. Afterwards, using six whaler's try-pots as retorts, he reduced 2000 pounds of mercury.

Later, part of the mine was sold to Baron, Forbes and Company of Tepis, Mexico, an English concern. Alexander Forbes came to the mine and brought men and necessary equipment to work it in November 1847. Retorts were used until 1850 when furnaces were installed to give a bigger output. The furnaces were 150 to 200 feet along with a series of condensing chambers. Brick smoke stacks from the old furnaces can still be seen on the hill above New Almaden.

For the first years of the 1860's the mine was tied up in the biggest legal battle that the State had known and which is still one of the biggest in California legal history. The mine was found to be so rich that it was worth fighting for. Finally in 1863 the Quicksilver Mining Company bought it for $1,700,000. This company worked the mine until after the turn of the century. In 1865 the mine output was four million pounds of quicksilver, which was twice as large as the best yearly figure of the ancient Almaden mine.

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Since the war the mine has not been worked because the price of quicksilver has been too low to make mining profitable. At the present time (1936) some of the old mine dumps are being worked over for the metal they still contain.

Miners, during the boom days of the mine, were held very much in

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check and found themselves bound to the mines. They were made to buy all their supplies, food, clothing, tobacco, and liquor, in the company store at higher prices than they would have paid in San Jose. In this way they were generally in debt to the company and could not leave. They also paid rent to the company for their living quarters. They were encouraged to frequent the bar in their off hours.